

Is the Royal Arse for Kicking or for Licking? Francis Bacon and the conflicting urges of the statesman, the client and the philosopher

In this paper, I shall be discussing the conflicting urges of Francis Bacon regarding his treatment of King James I, and his dream of a state-funded programme of natural philosophy. How was he to achieve this aim? Should he follow the road of obsequious flattery pioneered by so many prospective clients, courtiers and suchlike, or should he follow a rockier road, in which James would be under no illusions regarding his place in Bacon's quest for knowledge. Was, indeed, the Royal arse for kicking or for licking?

On 12<sup>th</sup> October, 1620, Francis Bacon, then Lord Chancellor and at the very peak of his power and influence, sent a lavish presentation copy of his magnum opus, *Novum Organum*, to James I. Two letters were included within this presentation: one a printed dedicatory letter included within the covers of *Novum Organum* itself; the other a private, handwritten letter.<sup>1</sup>

The publicly published dedicatory letter is, to all intents and purposes, both an example of Bacon's rhetorical skill and a virtuoso 'improvisation' on the commonplace which was the dedicatory letter: that is, a letter designed either to attract the patronage of a superior or to act as the public demonstration of a current relationship. This letter manages to achieve both aims, simultaneously acting as a plea *and* an advertisement, demonstrating the complex relationship which existed between James, his Chancellor and their public: it is, in essence, a performance of an ongoing negotiation. While the letter also serves as a demonstration of Bacon's tactics for manipulating both patron and public, it provides us with only one version of events: the second, handwritten letter casts Bacon's motives and tactics in a different light.

It is this private letter which allows us access to the more delicate negotiation occurring between James and Bacon. Just as any letter is to be read in the context in which it is written – that of the wider correspondence of which it forms a part – so the dedicatory letter as published within *Novum Organum* and the private letter which accompanied it need to be considered as part of the same discourse. In this respect, the private letter here assumes the form of an 'enclosure', a separate note designed to accompany a more formal letter in order to allow the latter's easy comprehension – especially where a meaning in the primary letter has been purposely obscured.

In the handwritten letter, (henceforth referred to as the 'private' one) Bacon himself draws the attention of the reader – in this case the king, James I – of the differing nature of this letter when compared with the published dedicatory letter:

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<sup>1</sup> Note that I have used the version contained at the LPL, Gibson papers, MS 936, art 129. This is the same draught with corrections used by Spedding, but the original gives a better idea of the process of writing the letter, and the care which Bacon took to get it right. It is relatively easy to see when Bacon changed his mind, or added extra lines (in his own hand) to the draught original. These differences are simply not noted by Spedding.

And this is quote 1 on your sheet

It may please your most excellent Majestie

It being one thing, to speak or write, specially to a king  
in publike, another in private although I have  
dedicated a worke or rather a porcion of a worke  
5 which at last, I have overcome to your Majestie by a  
publike Epistle, where I speak to you in the  
hearing of others, yet, I thought fitt also,  
humbly to seek accesses for the same, not so  
much to your person, as to your judgment by these  
10 private lines. <sup>2</sup>

In the first sentence, Bacon highlights both the nature of this communication, that is, a private letter, and also his ability to speak to the king both in public and in private. Bacon seems at first to suggest that the act of speaking and writing are practically the same, but the important factor here is the audience: whether you speak *or* write to a king in public, you necessarily have an audience, or, as may be more relevant, a witness. If Bacon considered speaking and writing to be the same thing in private, however, it would be difficult to see why he saw fit to *write* this private communication to James. It could be that writing is potentially the more private method of communicating, as getting the king alone – so that one may speak away ‘from the hearing of others’ - might prove difficult, though as Lord Chancellor, one would imagine Bacon might have as good a chance as any to make such a private speech. A more likely answer, however, is to be found in Bacon’s essay 'Of Negotiating', quote 2 on your sheets, where he writes 'It is generally better to deal by speech than by letter [...] letters are good, when a man would draw an answer by letter back again; or when it may serve for a man's justification afterwards to produce his own letter.'<sup>3</sup>

By writing this letter, Bacon perhaps reserves the right to make the private public, if necessary, at a later date, while also allowing James to read it more than once, as his leisure allows: certainly, this might prove useful if the message it contains is not available for immediate apprehension.

It is certainly the case that this letter drew ‘an answer by letter back again,’ as James responded in writing on 16<sup>th</sup> October, Bacon replying four days later. Yet whether the letter drew a response is not the issue. It seems that the private letter functions as if it were a separate part of the public letter, and that reading each letter in isolation merely gives one

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<sup>2</sup> MS 936, art 129: letter from Bacon to James [12 October 1620]. Draft with annotations by Bacon.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Bacon, *The Essays or Counsels Civil and Moral*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

side of the story. The letter which opens this correspondence between Bacon and James, and which concerns, primarily, Bacon's desires for James to sponsor his project, does not consist of one letter, therefore, but two, necessarily blurring the boundaries between the public and the private communication. It also complicates the message being delivered, as it seems as if one letter can be written to communicate different messages to different readers. Indeed, these two letters must be read together if we are to gain an understanding of their full meaning.

The public letter begins straightforwardly enough, with a roll-call of James's honours:

And this is quote 3 on your sheet

To our Most Gracious and Mighty Prince and Lord James, By the Grace of God of Great Britain , France, and Ireland King, Defender of the Faith, etc.

Most Gracious and Mighty King,<sup>4</sup>

Whether technically accurate or not, this list of titles is recalled almost precisely in Dr. Rawley's dedication of Bacon's posthumous work, *Sylva Sylvarum*, to Prince Charles some five years later. This is standard rhetoric, the like of which can be observed in many official letters of the day, and demonstrated in manuals such as Angel Day's *The English Secreterie*, regarding how one should address an individual of higher status than oneself. Bacon, like Rawley after him, is bound by the rules of propriety, and plain good sense, to address the king in such a manner. Indeed, it might usefully be termed an epistolary bow, performed in full view of the wider audience, again highlighting the fact that this letter is, indeed, a public performance.

Having placed the text thus, Bacon immediately manipulates the form and shifts from a fully formal address to what might be considered a calculated informality:

Quote 4 on your sheets

Your Majesty may perhaps accuse me of larceny, having stolen from your affairs so much time as was required for this work. I know not what to say for myself.

With this opening line, Bacon is affecting the form of the personal letter, what Day defined as 'the familiar and mutuall talke of one absent friende to another.'<sup>5</sup> He does this through his

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1999), p.109.

<sup>4</sup> *Works* IV, 11

<sup>5</sup> Angel Day, *The English Secretary, or Method of Writing of Epistles and Letters* (P. S. for C. Burbie: London, 1599), B4<sup>v</sup>.

informality of style, an especially effective device when juxtaposed with the rigid formality of the letter's opening address, yet he does something more, as he also imagines the response of the addressee, creating the effect of an Erasmian epistolary conversation, a conversation Jardine has termed the 'mutual *exchange* of speech between friends.'<sup>6</sup> Bacon allows the 'lay' reader – that is, any reader other than the personal addressee – to feel as if they are, indeed, party to a private letter through this device. The lay reader therefore has the nature of the relationship between James and Bacon highlighted for them as one of a relaxed, easy intimacy. This relaxed and easy intimacy is reinforced by Bacon's nonchalant talk about having stolen from the King, a tactic which gives an powerful impression of the position Bacon occupies within government; this is a man who can joke with the king about stealing his property. The very first line of this dedicatory letter, therefore, tells the reader more about Bacon, his power and his relationship with James than it does about the accompanying work and its fitness to redound to James's glory – the standard fare of the dedicatory letter. The fact that Bacon follows this line with 'I know not what to say for myself' is almost insolently disingenuous: this is Francis Bacon, after all.

Bacon's next argument revolves around the more traditional game, that of considering the work and how it may glorify the king's name, perhaps even in the distant future:

Quote 5 on your sheets

For of time there can be no restitution, unless it be that what has been abstracted from your business may perhaps go to the memory of your name and the honour of your age; if these things are indeed worth anything.<sup>7</sup>

Yet once more we can see Bacon manipulating both readers – king and public – as he almost absent-mindedly suggests a way in which the time which he has stolen can be accounted for, and most tellingly places this bounty in the future. The future benefits of *Novum Organum*, and the concept of time itself, are something of a theme which runs through this letter – just as, indeed, the concept of futurity and posterity runs through Bacon's works as a whole.

The things contained within the work are not only 'quite new', but also 'copied from an ancient model': Bacon here lays claim to a mastery of both times, the future in terms of his work and the past in terms of the world and nature. The work itself is considered by Bacon (though not, the audience may assume, by anyone else) to be 'a child of time, not wit' while any good it brings 'may be ascribed to the infinite mercy and goodness of God' and, of course, far more importantly, 'to the felicity of your majesty's times.' Bacon publicly lays down his devotion to the king in such terms that he intends to serve him even after death, 'as

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<sup>6</sup> Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus, Man of Letters: The Construction of Charisma in Print* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), p.150.

<sup>7</sup> In Latin, this sentence reads thus: 'Temporis enim non fit restitutio; nisi forte quod detractum fuerit temporis rebus tuis, id memoriae nominis tui et honori saeculi tui reponi possit; si modo haec alicujus sint preti.' (*Works*

I have been an honest and affectionate servant in my life, so after my death I may yet perhaps, through the kindling of this new light in the darkness of philosophy, be the means of making this age famous to posterity.'

The renaissance concept of patronage was fundamentally predicated on a mutually beneficial exchange between patron and client, and we can see here what Bacon is offering James, in full view of the public: the eternal fame due the man behind the 'regeneration and restoration of the sciences.' The reader would be forgiven for inferring that Bacon offers this to James with no thought of reward, or even that such glory is now not only inevitable, but inevitably James's. Yet Bacon has, of course, explained with suspiciously uncharacteristic modesty to all of his readers that it is the stuff within, the stuff to which Bacon has devoted so much of the time he stole from the king, which can effect this great thing. Even when he steals from James he serves him: this message might easily be considered as being more for the benefit of the lay reader than for the king himself, especially given the inclement financial weather which was then brewing for Bacon.

Of course, such a mutually beneficial arrangement *must* include something for Bacon – it is all very well for him to provide the means for James's name to be made famous to posterity, but there must be some sort of return on Bacon's investment, even if this investment was made with someone else's capital: *Novum Organum*, apparently a work of time, not wit, was created with the time Bacon freely admits he stole from James's affairs. Bacon's desires are not to be couched in straightforward language, no matter how much Bacon wishes the reader to think that they are:

Quote 6 on your sheets

Lastly, I have a request to make - a request no way unworthy of your Majesty, and that which especially concerns the work in hand; namely, that you who resemble Solomon in so many things - in the gravity of your judgments, in the peacefulness of your reign, in the largeness of your heart, in the noble variety of the books which you have composed - would further follow his example in taking order for the collecting and perfecting of a Natural and Experimental history, true and severe (unencumbered with literature and book-learning), such as philosophy may be built upon - such, in fact, as I shall in its proper place describe: so that at length, after the lapse of so many ages, philosophy and the sciences may no longer float in the air, but rest on the solid foundation of experience of every kind, and the same well examined and weighed. I have provided the machine, but the stuff must be gathered from the facts of nature.

It may be expected that a 'request' might be just that, a simple request, but Bacon qualifies it to such a degree that by the time the reader reaches it, the fact that there is a request at all is all but lost in a sea of flattery. And this, mark you, from the same Francis Bacon whose dedication of his *Advertisement Touching an Holy Warre* to Lancelot Andrews stated that he was 'ever an enemy to flattering dedications.'<sup>8</sup> The actual request is this: 'that you should take order for the collecting and perfecting of a natural history.'

Bacon sandwiches this request into a passage of one hundred and sixty-eight words, working in a flattering reference to James's likeness to Solomon alongside a flattering reference to *Novum Organum* and thus Bacon himself, a re-iteration of the effect of this on the way in which the future will look upon James and his reign – including a diagnosis of the present ills of philosophy – and a quick explanation of *Novum Organum* and Bacon's philosophy itself. The intention seems to be to make James's granting of this request seem inevitable to all who should read this letter: inevitable not just because of Bacon's arguments for its granting, but also because of James's great qualities. The astute reader will, at this point, realise that Bacon will only be able to serve the king after death if the king serves Bacon now, by granting his request: a request, moreover, that will surely only benefit the world and the king's name, not Bacon, his 'humble' servant.

If the public letter suggests that, while the proposed work may redound to the glorious memory of James, it requires James to make it happen, and that this he will inevitably do, the private letter casts this deal in a different light:

Quote 7 on your sheets

And to tell your Majestie truly what  
I thinke, I accompt your favour, may be to this  
worke, as much as a hundred yeares time, for  
40 I am persuaded, this work will gain upon mens  
minds in ages but your gracing it may make it  
take hold more swiftly,

Bacon's public stance, being that James should follow the example of Solomon, making orders for the gathering and collecting of a natural history so that philosophy may rest on the solid foundation of experience, suggests that if James, this most wise of kings, will not make it happen, it never shall. Privately, however, Bacon is 'persuaded that this work will gain upon mens minds in ages.' In other words, the outcome is certain, it is merely the timing which is not. The suggestion in the public letter that the work relies on James's favour is now turned around, and Bacon is privately presenting James with an opportunity to put his name

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<sup>8</sup> *Works* VII, 15

to something which is inevitable. He may coincidentally recoup some hundred years of time in the process: surely a good return for the time Bacon has slyly invested on James's behalf. Where publicly it is Bacon's work which is up for negotiation, the private letter makes James's position in posterity the matter of this exchange.

It is almost as if Bacon were now patron and James the client.

Bacon's allusion to Solomon in the public letter is another subtle tactic, easily misunderstood and gently redrawn in the private letter. In his comparison of James to Solomon, Bacon is not only following an almost traditional mode of flattery within the realms of the dedicatory letter, but appealing to James's vanity in what was, for Jacobean courtiers, virtually a commonplace. As Alan Stewart has noted: 'James was often to think, speak and write of himself as a Solomon or a David - and there were plenty of writers and preachers among his subjects who were willing to support him in the notion.'<sup>9</sup> In his use of rhetoric, however, Bacon mirrors the suspicions of Erasmus who, according to Lynne Magnusson, 'accepts the strategy of giving tacit advice to a ruler or king "through false praise" in his *De conscribendis epistolis*, where he states "I suspect that the panegyrics of princes were invented for this very purpose, that under the semblance of praise they should without offence or shame, be reminded of their faults."<sup>10</sup> By introducing the comparison between James and Solomon and then listing the qualities this entails, Bacon makes it easy to miss the fact that he is actually suggesting that James has yet to come up to the mark. Without the panegyric, the public exhortation reads thus 'that you who resemble Solomon in so many things would further follow his example.'

In the private letter, freed from the constraints of performative necessity, Bacon changes the tack of his flattery, appealing to James's fervent belief in the divine right of kings: 'I thought fitt also, humbly to seek accesse for the same, not so much to your person, as to your judgment by these private lines.' Just as can be seen in the public letter, where Bacon seems to be lobbying on behalf of the work, not himself, here he seems to be requesting a discourse between *Novum Organum* and James's judgement: patron and client are no longer James and Bacon, but kingly judgement and the work itself. Bacon's use of the term judgement is particularly shrewd and subtle as for James, judgement sat at the very heart of his self-image. James had tangled with parliament several times over his views of kingship, judgement and the law: Alan Stewart again, this time in print as quote 8 - 'As far as he was concerned, the King was the lawmaker of his country. Law was an expression of a king's divine right: kings made the law, and kings could alter it at their pleasure. "Kings are properly judges," he was to pronounce, "and judgement properly belongs to them from God."<sup>11</sup> It is no accident that the biblical king Bacon chose to compare and contrast with James was renowned for his

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<sup>9</sup> Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King, A Life of James VI and I* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), p.147.

<sup>10</sup> Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), (quoting Erasmus, 'On Writing Letters', p.189), p.70.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King*, p.233.

wisdom and judgement, and that Bacon, a few lines into the private letter, terms James 'the greatest master of Reason, and auctor of beneficence.' This, however, is merely the preamble to Bacon's *piece de resistance*, where he moves from the public recycling of a Solomonic commonplace into a privately direct comparison with the God of Genesis, who 'formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.'<sup>12</sup> Bacon writes of *Novum Organum* in strikingly similar terms:

Quote 9 on your sheets

This worke, is but a newe body of clay, wherein  
your Majestie <sup>^by^</sup> bring your Countenance and protection  
may breath life.

Bacon has subtly changed what was a simile - 'you who resemble' - into a direct metaphor, and not only one which we might assume would appeal to the divinely appointed king James, but also one which it may not have been wise to voice in public, not least for a committed parliamentarian.

Indeed, we can safely assume that the contents of this private letter remained private, even though its existence as a letter was more widely known. When contemporary commentator John Chamberlain wrote of the publishing of *Novum Organum*, he commented thus:

Quote 10 on your sheets

'This weeke the Lord Chauncellor hath set fourth his new worke caled *Instauratio Magna*, or a kind of new organum of all philosophie. In sending yt to the King he wrote that he wisht his Majestie might be as long in reading it as he hath been in composing and polishing yt, which is well nigh thirtie yeares: I have read no more than the bare title, and am not greatly encouraged by Master Cuffes Judgement, who having long since perused yt gave this censure, that a fool could not have written such a worke, and a wise man wold not.'<sup>13</sup>

It is true that Bacon mentions that the work has been a long time, 'neare thirty yeares', in writing, but it is James himself who suggests, in the words of quote 11 on your sheets, that it is

a firme resolution I have taken, first to  
reade it through, with care and attention, though

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<sup>12</sup> Genesis 2.7.

I should steale some howers from my sleepe, having otherwise as little spare tyme to read it, as you had to write it<sup>14</sup>

Chamberlain's report is not only inaccurate, consisting presumably of a re-iteration of another's quick reading of the letter, chinese whispers or possibly even James's own partial reporting of the letter's contents, but it seems also that James himself is indulging in rhetorical games when he turns Bacon's joke regarding stolen time back on the teller. This, along with other lines James writes in reply to Bacon's pleas, suggests that we may doubt further the accuracy of Chamberlain's reports, not least when he states that, on the subject of *Novum Organum*, 'the king cannot forbear sometimes in reading his last booke to say that yt is like the peace of God, that passeth all understanding.'<sup>15</sup>

That Bacon does not, as was his habit, quote directly from one of his Latin bibles, but paraphrases in the vernacular, is also interesting, and may possibly be a nodding reference to the 'Authorised' bible James had instigated. It is, however, probably more significant that the public letter was in Latin, and the private in English. Latin was considered, especially by Bacon, to be the universal language, and certainly Rawley later reports that Bacon's works were translated into Latin 'for the good of other nations.' *Novum Organum*, and its accompanying letter, were in the universal language, allowing its wide and immediate dissemination throughout Europe: the private letter's use of the vernacular merely reinforces the assumption that its intended audience was one. It is true that some of the informality of style in the public letter I have identified may be more a matter of translation than of the original, but if this were to be so it would merely serve to accentuate the different effect of the private letter when presented in the vernacular.

There are subtle differences in language between the two letters, however, which are not adequately explained by their different languages. Jonathan Gibson has noted a 'disorientating split between language and intention'<sup>16</sup> inherent within the renaissance game of patronage, and this split is apparent in these two letters, as the public letter, being the public language of this exchange, is qualified and, at times, subtly contradicted by the private, which gives a better indication of the actual intention behind this proposed exchange.

In the public letter, Bacon creates a nexus of possibility and contingency with phrases such as 'may perhaps,' 'unless,' 'if these things,' 'if there be any good,' 'I may yet perhaps,' 'surely,' which makes its meaning hard to pin down. He poses questions in such a manner that it is

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<sup>13</sup> J. C. to D. C. London, October 28, 1620, in *Letters of John Chamberlain*, p. 324.

<sup>14</sup> BL Add. MS 5503 fol. 101.

<sup>15</sup> In *Letters of John Chamberlain*, 2 vols, ed. Norman Egbert McClure (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1939), p. 339.

hard to understand their subject: for example, does he refer to the things within his work or the memory of James's name and the honour of his age when he asks 'if these things are indeed worth anything'?<sup>17</sup> He also affects an uncharacteristic uncertainty on the worth of *Novum Organum* itself, in wondering 'if there be any good in what I have to offer.' This in contrast to the private letter's statement:

#### Quote 12

The worke [...] is no more but a new logick, teaching  
to invent and judge by induction, (as finding  
silogism incompetent for Sciences of Nature)  
15 and thereby to make Philosophie & Sciences both  
more true, and more Active;  
This tending to enlarge the bounds of Reason  
and to indowe mans Estate,

The private letter here shows no doubt whatsoever regarding the worth of *Novum Organum*. Again Bacon seems to be presenting possibilities in the public domain which he characterises as certainties in private. Certainly the private letter is more direct in its language, supplied with phrases such as 'I have'; 'is no more but a new logick'; 'was no improper oblation'; 'the reason why'; 'to speak plainly'; 'there is'; 'truly what I thinke'; 'I am persuaded'; 'I confess.' These phrases, moreover, refer either to the work or Bacon himself; gone is the subtly vacillating Bacon of the public letter.

In the public letter, Bacon obscures meaning through his use of language, allowing for the possibility of its meaning being fixed in retrospect: presumably in light of James's 'inevitable' actions. Bacon presents a strong concept of futurity, imagining how the future will one day view the present as past (a concept shared with other works of his which appeal directly to this future as if it were a patron), and his use of contingent language allows James the opportunity of creating this future.

In the private letter, with its direct language, Bacon is playing a very different game, however. He continues the themes picked up in the public letter, mixing more direct flattery with his general argument being that these works are inevitable: it is merely James's decision whether it is *he* whose name shall, like Solomon's, be connected with such an advance in natural philosophy for ages to come.

To the public, the public letter is designed to demonstrate the close bond between Bacon and

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<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Gibson, 'King Lear and the Patronage System,' pp.95-114 at 95.

<sup>17</sup> In a more modern translation, this line reads 'if this work has any value', yet still it is not clear whether the work is *Novum Organum* or the work of redounding to the honour of James's age or time.

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James while making a strong, if not irresistible, case for James's support. To James, the public letter is to be read by a posterity looking to grant James all honour due for his vision and reason, in his executing of Bacon's plans. It is the private letter which makes this dual reading possible for James.

For all their rhetorical subtlety and cunning strategy, the letters Bacon wrote to accompany *Novum Organum* in order to effect royal backing for his *Instauratio Magna* were quite spectacular and beautifully crafted failures. James chose not to bankroll Bacon's plans, and Bacon's subsequent fall from grace led to ever more complex rhetorical games being played as he sought to present a coherent plan to a future world he knew he would not see. The modern reader may be forgiven for expressing no surprise that Bacon's response to his close proximity to the royal backside was to lick it and kick it in equal measure, and sometimes simultaneously.